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Highlife and its Roots: Negotiating the social, cultural, and musical continuities between popular and traditional music in Ghana

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By William Matczynski

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Thank You To:

John Collins
Mark Mazullo
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Chuen-Fung Wong

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Introduction

Perhaps half a dozen times a year, Nana [Ampadu] and his [African Brothers] band will hold a dance, sometimes at a small hotel in a residential section of Accra like Kaneshie or Asylum Down, sometimes at a major nightclub like Apollo Theatre or Tiptoe Gardens. It is always necessary to fight the crowd in order to see him. Once one is past the crush at the door, there is often no place to sit. The dance floor is shoulder to shoulder with fans dancing non-stop. A significant number of people, mostly young men, dance enthusiastically by themselves or with each other, in a mass, facing the stage, always ready to raise their arms and shout encouragement. These are the believers. It seems as if many of the believers consider the event to be a contest between their shoes and the floor, and may the stronger one win.

…Most dancers are…involved in projecting themselves into the music, and they dance coolly, perhaps singing the songs to themselves and thinking about the lyrics…Their facial expressions are almost inward-looking, though they are always ready to look up, smile and greet each other.

…When the African Brothers play live, they really wind it up. When performing at a dance, they stretch out in the instrumental sections of their songs, laying down a solid groove and taking long solos…Nana is a small man, extremely handsome; the expression on his face when he plays looks simultaneously like that of a wise old man and a playful child. He has especially good rapport with his audiences, and when he plays his guitar, he watches his dancers just as a master drummer would, fulfilling all the interlocutor roles of a traditional African musician. When he says something, the audience roars (171-73).

- John Miller Chernoff

Highlife, the popular music of Ghana, represents one of the oldest, most pervasive, and highly influential popular styles on the African continent. John Miller Chernoff's rich description of an African Brothers Band concert from the 1970s captures the electric energy and excitement present at a live dancehall performance during the heyday of guitar-band highlife, further demonstrating the explosive popularity, power, and deep significance of highlife music in

Ghana. The "golden age" of highlife spanned from the 1950s through the 1970s, a period during which hundreds of bands operated across Ghana, nightclubs and dancehalls were filled with dancers moving to live music, and local record labels/recording studios released a staggering number of new and exciting highlife albums. This is music characterized by lilting guitar melodies, soulful singing, and Ghanaian rhythms, a music located at the intersections of tradition and "modernity."

Nana Kwame Ampadu, philosopher, storyteller, and the prolific musician described in Chernoff's anecdote, offers an intriguing conception of "highlife" music as "food for the soul."[1] As one must nourish the body with food, one must also nourish the soul with music. Ampadu's quote speaks to the powerful, universal hold that music has over us as human beings, yet another thread emerges here concerning the crucial position that highlife music occupies within Ghana. Highlife is itself the "soul" of Ghana's popular music, a soul that runs deeply through a century's worth of changing styles and shifting tastes, through periods of modernization, rapid urbanization, and post-colonialism, and into the complex landscape of 21st century Ghana. Highlife is decidedly a Ghanaian institution. It blares through radios and outdoor speakers in both rural and urban settings in Ghana, while the latest fashionable "hip-life" music (a fusion of the words "hip-hop" and "highlife") contains melodies, harmonies, and chord progressions found in the classic highlife music of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s.

The term "highlife" is itself a somewhat general one, used to refer to a number of different styles and sub-categories of popular music in Anglophone West Africa, including dance-band, guitar band, and palm wine varieties, in addition to styles like Burgher highlife,[2]

[1] This statement appears in the film *Africa Come Back* (1994) in the *Repercussions* series.
[2] Burgher highlife refers to the synthesizer-driven highlife music developed by Ghanaian musicians living abroad in Germany as immigrants. "Burgher" is a slang term which derives from the name of the city "Hamburg." Ghanaians

gospel highlife, disco highlife, etc. The list of permutations goes on, yet the genre is quintessentially a hybrid popular music form reflecting a fusion of diverse influences from within as well as outside of Ghana. The roots of highlife may be traced back to the early 20th century. European musical influence arrived in Ghana through Portuguese, Dutch, and finally British colonialism in the form of Western-style harmony/tonality, Christian hymns, and instruments such as the guitar, piano, and other orchestral/marching band instruments. Further influences arrived in Ghana from America and the Caribbean through the import and sale of gramophone records, including vaudeville music/dance, minstrel shows, and calypso music. Processes of musical transmission also occurred along the West African Coast, as Liberian Kru and Sierra Leonean sailors introduced Ghanaians to proto-highlife genres like *gome* in addition to the "two-finger" picking style of a uniquely West-African "guitarism." These external musical influences (European, North American, etc.) were to encounter Ghana's own rich variety of indigenous, traditional music styles. Highlife, then, reflects a synthesis of these global, diasporic elements, grounded in Ghana's indigenous music and "traditional culture." This music, the simultaneous expression of a uniquely Ghanaian worldview and challenges/changes brought about by colonialism and modernity, reaches back into the past (reminiscent of the Ghanaian concept *Sankofa*) while offering the potential for limitless creativity and innovation in the future.

As Ghanaian musicologist Kofi Agawu has argued in *Representing African Music*, ethnomusicologists and music scholars have largely undervalued highlife due to its diverse and mixed hybrid origins. Early ethnomusicologists, writes Karin Barber, "deplored the contamination of authentic indigenous traditional sounds by the infusion of Western rhythms,

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living abroad are often referred to as "Burghers." Burgher highlife artists include George Darko, Lee Dodou, and Charles Amoah.

melodies and technologies" (Agawu 119). Agawu similarly critiques this approach shared by early ethnomusicologists and anthropologists alike: "A male, guitar-playing African musician, wearing a pair of imported jeans and dark glasses, or a church musician steeped in tonic solfa…were of considerably less interest than the fierce-looking bush African sporting a grass skirt…beating on a drum, and invoking ancestral spirits without irony" (119). Even later scholars writing in the 1970s and '80s like Peter Manuel and David Coplan present conceptions of highlife music that appear somewhat problematic. Both Coplan and Manuel apply Ghanaian popular music to the metaphor of a pidgin language, suggesting "Western harmony and African melody and rhythm become less complex as they are incorporated into syncretic urban forms like highlife" (Manuel 85). While such statements appear valid at some level, they simplify far more complex processes at work and covertly devalue Ghana's popular music itself.

In this thesis, I argue that highlife goes beyond such simplistic reductions, constituting a genre that is autonomous and viable in its own right. Agawu offers a discussion of African identity and postcolonial theory that is relevant here in relation to highlife: "To describe an individual molded within such a culture as hybrid, to invoke the metaphor of *metisse*, is to undercomplicate the dynamics of identity formation…Postcolonial theory normalizes hybridity and thus makes possible a truer, more ethical mode of identity construction" (xvii). Such statements advocate for a breaking down of rigid boundaries, such as those which separate Ghanaian music into "traditional," "popular," and "art music" categories. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which highlife is in dialogue with Ghana's traditional music and culture, what John Collins describes as a "continuity with traditional life" (*E.T. Mensah* 1).

Deemphasizing conceptions of highlife as "simplified" or "pidgin," I argue that there is a fluid relationship between Ghana's traditional music and its highlife. Social, cultural, and

musical influences flow imperceptibly in both directions (from traditional to popular music, and vice versa), while in other cases aspects of "tradition" are intentionally brought to the forefront in service of various agendas and ideologies. In these situations, traditional music and culture become resources that musicians may strategically draw from, whether in reference to musical structures, themes, or the texts of songs themselves. Highlife constitutes not a simplification of traditional music, but rather a creative reorganization and re-contextualization of tradition. At the same time I wish to expand the small body of scholarly research focusing on highlife, an area which is dominated by less than five writers. Highlife has generally been devalued by scholars due to concerns listed above, and here I intend to reverse this trend by placing highlife music at the center rather than the periphery.

In particular I am interested in the "classic" electric guitar-band highlife of the 1960s and '70s, the music of such artists as the African Brothers, Alex Konadu, K. Gyasi, C.K. Mann, and countless others. I do not extend my analysis past the early 1980s, as the Ghanaian music industry was practically decimated due to great economic hardships after J.J. Rawlings seized political power in 1981. An examination of the music of these pre-1980 artists reveals a negotiation of sorts taking place, whereby the "continuity" between highlife and traditional music/life is manifested. In addition, I examine the "Ga Cultural highlife" movement of the 1970s as a case study of a neo-traditional popular music, a movement representing a conscious revival of tradition through highlife music.

Traditional, Popular, and Art Music in Ghana

Music scholars have tended to rely upon a general division of musical types into traditional, popular, and art music categories. Yet in many ways the boundaries between these

categories easily become blurred when put under scrutiny. Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa these three categories are intimately intertwined and in conversation with each other. While my focus is on the dialogue between popular and traditional musics acted out in Ghanaian highlife, a general understanding of Ghana's musical history and landscape is necessary. Following Seeger's model, I provide a discussion of Ghana's traditional, popular, and art music genres.

Traditional Music

Traditional or "folk" music in Ghana is characterized by a large degree of diversity in terms of genres/styles, instruments, and social function, reflecting Ghana's own tremendous ethnic diversity. Ghana is divided into ten administrative regions, yet for my purposes here I propose a simplistic model categorizing traditional music into four musical zones largely based on ethnic lines (see map in appendix): Akan (including the Asante[3] and the costal Fantis), Ewe (located in the Eastern "Volta Region"), Ga (traditionally based in Accra), and "Northern" (including ethnic groups like the Dagara and Dagomba located primarily in Northern Ghana). This model ignores Ghana's tremendous array of languages and ethnic groups, yet it serves to illustrate some general commonalities and musical relationships expressed geographically.

Ethnomusicologist and composer J.H. Kwabena Nketia of the University of Ghana, Legon (author of the classic text *The Music of Africa*) is the foremost scholar on Ghana's traditional music, and his written works remain some of the only relevant texts available outside of Ghana. Most of the data presented in this section is based upon Nketia's research. Yet, for all of Nketia's taxonomies and categorization in *The Music of Africa* and *African Music in Ghana*, he never quite outlines a clear definition of the term "traditional music." This question is

[3] The broad heading of "Akan" encompasses a number of sub-ethnic groups including the Asante, Fanti, and Baoule (of Côte d'Ivoire).

frequently taken for granted, yet what do we mean by "traditional" music/culture? As anthropologists have acknowledged in the latter half of the 20th century, the concept of "traditional" culture as something fixed and unchanging has proved to be problematic. On the contrary, culture is in a constant state of flux, with traditions continually being appropriated and invented in new ways. The "indigenous" music of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, has been shaped by Islamic and European influences (as Nketia has demonstrated), while dances that appear "traditional" and ancient to outsiders may in fact be the product of modern popular music influences. Steps used in the Ga dance *kpanlogo*, for example, are inspired by American Rock & Roll, Elvis Presley, and the Twist (Collins, personal communication). Constructs such as "tradition" and "authenticity" quickly break down under scrutiny, yet for the purposes of this paper I will offer several generalizations about traditional music in Ghana, many of which apply to sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

One, traditional music is largely indigenous to Ghana, making use of instruments, musical elements, and themes that are linked to pre-colonial genres and traditions. *Two*, traditional music often fits within specific social contexts (a point which Nketia has stressed to great length). Here, music serves distinct functions, is used according to the specific occasion, and is intimately connected to daily life (examples include genres used in the context of funerals, puberty rites, work, and recreation). *Three*, while some traditional styles are the domain of professional musicians (royal music for instance), many genres are performed by amateurs. Men's and women's organizations, for example, may form their own amateur music groups. Furthermore, non-musicians themselves may participate in performances through singing, dancing, hand clapping, etc. *Four*, traditional music exists as an oral tradition, and notation is not used. *Five*, much like language, each ethnic group in Ghana has its own distinct repertoire of

traditional genres, songs, and rhythms. Traditional pieces, then, are linked to specific ethnic groups in most cases. At the same time, some genres do cross ethnic lines. The Ga, for instance, play *adowa* music (a funeral dance of the Akan), yet this "Ga adowa" uses instruments and musical structures different from those found in Akan varieties.

Nketia has focused a great deal on the second characteristic I have listed above, the social/cultural function of traditional music, and I will go into more depth here about this distinguishing characteristic of traditional music. In *African Music in Ghana*, Nketia identifies three musical types categorized by function: recreational, occupational, and incidental music (10). Recreational music includes styles that are not "ritually or ceremonially bound," performed for entertainment, festivals, or other social events (Nketia, *African Music* 10). Occupational music, in contrast, is defined as music "linked with rites and ceremonies or other activities of individuals, kinship groups, associations, communities or states" (Nketia, *African Music* 12). This includes religious events, "life cycle" ceremonies, funerals, the activities of royalty, etc. The final type, incidental music, is used in non-ritual and non-ceremonial contexts. Nketia provides the examples of children's music, music related to occupation (e.g. fishing, agriculture, pounding), lullabies, and music associated with storytelling. Examination of these three musical types is important, as traditional African music may largely be distinguished from popular genres by its unique social function and its integration into the everyday life of the community. Nketia goes even further here to stress the importance of music on the village/small community level. He writes, "[Performance] assumes a multiple role in relation to the community; it provides at once an opportunity for sharing in creative experience, for participating in music as a form of community experience, and for using music as an avenue for the expression of group sentiments" (Nketia, *The Music of Africa* 22).

Apart from social/cultural aspects, traditional music in Ghana is characterized by specific musical elements, structures, and instruments. An understanding of these basic elements is essential here, as the characteristics of traditional music largely form the underlying musical structures that are present in highlife. Instrument types in Ghana include aerophones, chordophones, membranophones, and idiophones (bells, rattles, xylophones), yet while much scholarly emphasis has been placed on African rhythm and drumming, the human voice appears to be the most widely used "instrument" in Ghana. Some styles may be purely instrumental, yet singing is truly pervasive (Sowah Mensah, personal communication). In addition, there is tremendous variety in traditional ensembles, ranging from solo vocal/instrumental formats to full choruses accompanied by drums and other percussion instruments. These large ensembles, which play pieces I will refer to here as "dances," are likely the most common to be found in Ghana.

In this type of dance/drumn ensemble, a medley of songs is sung over an accompaniment of drums, rattles, and bells, while dancing also typically occurs. Due to the possibilities offered by medley-style singing, performances may last anywhere from several minutes to several hours. Group singing is commonly structured in the form of "call and response," where group refrains (usually in harmony) are sung in response to the solo "calls" of lead singers. Drumming accompaniment is organized hierarchically and controlled by a "lead drummer," yet perhaps the most important role is that of the bell player. This musician plays a repeated, short rhythmic ostinato (the timeline) on a bell or similar idiophone for the duration of the piece. Timelines differ from one piece to another (see figure 1.1), yet they appear pervasive in Ghanaian music (from traditional music to highlife and hip-life), providing a rhythmic framework over which all other instruments are organized.

Figure 1.1: Kpanlogo timeline (4/4) & Agbadza timeline (12/8)

Traditional music is performed in a variety of contexts in 21st-century Ghana, from functions such as funerals and festivals to recreational events. Yet, as Kofi Agawu has noted, traditional music has taken on new dimensions since the mid 20th century with the foundation of the Arts Council of Ghana and the National Dance Ensemble in the 1960s. These groups were responsible for presenting an "invention of tradition," what Agawu describes as a "transethnic canon, a classic collection of cultural artifacts" (19). Dances and musical genres were codified, representing an integration of musical ideas both old and new. This period also saw the birth of a new type of traditional ensemble, the "cultural group." These groups may play a variety of traditional styles, and in present-day Ghana they usually perform in order to make a living (playing for tourists, performing at events/functions, etc.). The existence of multiple spheres of traditional music performance underscores the often-contradictory realities of post-colonial life in Africa.

Popular Music

Highlife is Ghana's first popular music, and in many ways it is also West Africa's first transnational popular genre (particularly widespread in Anglophone countries such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia). Yet in which ways is highlife a distinctly "popular" music? Peter Manuel offers several generalizations about popular styles in *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World* that are relevant here in relation to West African highlife. First and foremost, highlife is a

commodified genre that is closely tied to the mass media. Music is disseminated via radio and television, while recordings by particular artists (whether in the form of vinyl, cassettes, or CDs) are produced and sold by a variety of recording companies/studios. The recording musicians themselves are generally professionals with some degree of specialized musical knowledge. Furthermore, highlife is a product of urbanization, shifting identities, and other rapid changes brought about by European colonization. "For the city dwellers of the developing world," writes Manuel, "neither traditional 'folk' forms nor imported Western styles may fully express social identity. Rather, new musics are generated which syncretize and reinterpret old and new elements in a distinctive metaphorical expression" (17). Highlife music, then, represents an expression of urban identities shifting through colonialism, independence, and post-colonial periods.

In this way, the history of highlife is at once a history of Ghana, its politics, and its people. John Collins, the foremost scholar on Ghanaian popular music, identifies two main branches of highlife music which developed simultaneously at the beginning of the 20th century: (1) Dance-band highlife, and (2) Guitar-band highlife.[4] Originally of British descent, Collins has lived in Ghana for most of his adult life, and is currently a professor at the University of Ghana, Legon. Additionally, Collins is himself a highlife musician, having played with such artists as Koo Nimo, F. Kenya, Ebo Taylor, and his own Bokoor Band. Dance-band highlife emerged in the early 20th century out of the tradition of British dance orchestras and military bands. This high-class popular music developed in costal cities such as Accra and Cape Coast (where the first colonial outposts in sub-Saharan Africa were established by the Portuguese in the 1400s),

[4] Collins does identify a third category of "brass band" music, referring to widespread groups which play traditional songs on brass instruments, accompanied by Western snare drums, Ghanaian bells/rattles, and a bass drum. Brass bands commonly appear at funerals, parades, official functions, and other types of celebrations in Ghana. While Collins defines brass band music as "highlife," I choose to leave out this genre here due to its position outside the realm of recording and the mass media.

paralleling the birth of a "purely indigenous Westernized social and economic elite" (Coplan 99). As early as 1914, musical groups like the *Excelsior Orchestra* from Accra, comprised entirely of Ghanaian musicians playing Western band instruments, performed "Waltzes, Foxtrots, Quicksteps, Ragtimes," and arrangements of traditional melodies for "a black elite audience in top hats and evening dress" (Collins, *Musicmakers* 2). It was in this context that working-class Ghanaian "onlookers" coined the term "highlife," a derisive characterization of the African elite. Over the following decades "highlife" would come to represent all of Ghana's varied popular music styles, shedding its original meaning and somewhat negative connotations.

After World War II, dance-band highlife underwent significant changes due primarily to the music of trumpeter E.T. Mensah (dubbed the "King of Highlife") and his Tempos Band from Accra. The Tempos introduced a new dance-band sound closer to that of a "jazz combo" rather than a large dance orchestra, a sound which also reflected a further indigenization of Western musical elements. New percussion instruments were introduced (bells, rattles, claves, congas) and rhythms were integrated from both Caribbean calypso and traditional Ghanaian music. Song lyrics shifted from English to local languages, while texts conveyed themes relevant to everyday, urban Ghanaians. In this way, the Tempos became the model for subsequent dance-bands,[5] while highlife was solidified as the music of the "common man" and the newly emerging nation of Ghana. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, championed this national highlife music as quintessentially Ghanaian and African, going so far as to attempt to change the label "highlife" to "osibisaba"[6] in order to avoid the former term's elite connotations. By this time, however, the word "highlife" had become too deeply imbedded in the Ghanaian consciousness to be discarded

[5] Outside of Ghanaian dance-bands like the Black Beats, Uhuru, and the Ramblers, the influence of E.T. Mensah and the Tempos spread to other West African nations during the 1950s and '60s. This was primarily due to performance tours outside of Ghana (particularly influential in the development of Nigerian highlife).
[6] Osibisaba refers to a proto-highlife Fanti genre from the early 20th century.

(Collins, personal communication). In addition, it is particularly intriguing that Nkrumah chose to surround himself with highlife musicians during his time as president. While touring Mali, Tunisia, Poland, and the former Soviet Union in 1963, Nkrumah traveled with five top highlife musicians and a full dance-band as his accompaniment (King Onyina, E.K. Nyame, Kakaiku, Bob Cole, K. Gyasi, and the Broadway Band) (Koo Nimo 5). While Ghanaian chiefs and kings typically surround themselves with royal drummers, Nkrumah instead chose highlife performers as his "court musicians."

While dance-band music has played a decidedly important role in the history of Ghana, it has largely been overshadowed by "guitar-band" highlife, the second category identified by John Collins. The "antiquated" sounds of dance-band highlife are rarely heard in present-day Ghana, yet the guitar-band varieties of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s are directly related to Ghana's 21st century popular music landscape. Modern popular genres like hip-life and gospel-highlife are the legacy of the early guitar-band styles, and in fact the first recordings to be made of Ghana's popular music by Zonophone in the 1920s were of this guitar-oriented variety. The "classic" guitar-band music of the mid 20th century is my primary interest here. During this period hundreds of bands flourished across Ghana, releasing records on local Ghanaian labels like *Agoro*, *Essiebons*, *Gapophone*, and *Ambassador* to be sold within the continent. In addition, a great deal of creativity, experimentation, and musical diversity were encouraged by these local labels. This model allowed artists to experiment with musical fusions (i.e. Afrobeat, funk) and "tap into" the deep Ghanaian repertoire of traditional songs and styles, contradicting conceptions of popular music as hegemonic and imposed from the top down (as scholars like Adorno have suggested).

In contrast to the upscale dance-band music played by groups like the Tempos, guitar-band highlife emerged in the early 20th century as the music of sailors, fishermen, and the working classes. Originating in the costal Fanti area of Ghana, this early guitar-band music reflected an integration of traditional Akan music and costal guitar styles (largely introduced by Liberian Kru sailors). Groups during the early 20th century (such as the famous Kumasi Trio) typically featured several guitars, bells/percussion, and *premprensua* (a bass "hand piano" of the Akan), with the instrumentalists also singing. Over time this guitar music (variously referred to as *dagomba*, *ashiko*, *osibisaba*, etc.) came to be called "palm wine music," a reference to the small palm wine bars where local guitar-band musicians informally performed (Manuel 90). In many ways, this palm wine music is quintessentially Akan and intimately connected with traditional music. Vocal textures, melodies, and harmonies derive from traditional genres, while the unique style of "highlife guitar" is drawn from the playing technique of the *seprewa*, a local Akan harp. Subsequently, the language of much guitar-band highlife is Asante *Twi* (a lingua franca of sorts for Southern Ghana), although Ga, Ewe, and English varieties do appear. At the same time highlife is a polyglot music by nature, with songs frequenting switching between such languages as Twi and Pidgin English, for instance.

In the 1950s and '60s guitar-band highlife became associated with "concert parties," dramatic/musical comedy productions staged by troupes of itinerant musicians across Ghana for rural and urban audiences of all classes. Like highlife, the concert party developed as a hybrid art form with influences drawn from American vaudeville and minstrelsy in addition to traditional Ghanaian storytelling forms. Due to pioneering musician/performers like E.K. Nyame and Kakaiku, highlife came to represent the music of the concert party, with performances alternating between spoken dialogue, solo songs, and group highlife numbers.

Many of Ghana's most popular guitar-band musicians during the 1960s and '70s led their own concert party groups, including Nana Ampadu (African Brothers), J.A. Adofo (City Boys), A.B. Crentsil (Sweet Talks/Ahenfo), and Alex Konadu (Konadu's concert) (Collins, *Highlife Time* xvi). These musicians represent some of the most famous exponents of electric guitar-band highlife. Unlike the local palm wine music, the electric highlife of the 1970s incorporated electric guitars, organs, kit drum, and often a horn section. Along with their concert party performances, these very famous musicians released numerous albums, performed in nightclubs and dancehalls, and toured outside Ghana in such locations as London and the U.S.

Highlife music suffered in the 1980s following a coup carried out by Jerry Rawlings[7] in 1981 (following a failed attempt in 1979). Due to harsh curfews and other restrictions, Ghana's live music scene was virtually wiped out and the music industry as a whole was severely damaged. John Collins describes this period as absolutely devastating. Yet highlife regained strength in the 1990s with the birth of new popular genres like hip-life and gospel highlife. Live music is slowly returning, while young people are showing an increased interest in the old highlife music of their parents' generation.

Art Music

Ghanaian art music (as well as that of other African nations) has largely been underrepresented in the academic literature, and here too I will spend only a short time discussing this genre. Regardless, the work of African composers is fascinating and worthy of study, reflecting a dynamic interplay between African traditional, popular, and Western classical elements. African art music emerged in the 20th century, with pieces generally situated within

[7] Rawlings is a controversial figure within Ghana, viewed by some as the man who brought democracy to Ghana with an iron fist, while others conceive of him as a dictator who overstayed as president for over twenty years.

the tradition of Western art music, composed using staff notation, played by professional musicians, and performed in a concert setting for an attentive audience. However, as theorized by such composers as Ephraim Amu, J.H. Kwabena Nketia, and Akin Euba (of Nigeria), West African art music represents a movement towards composition in a distinctly "African" idiom. In this way, pieces may be written for ensembles requiring both Western and local instruments, while those solely for Western instruments make use of rhythms, melodies, and harmonies extracted from traditional genres, as well as highlife.

Nigerian composer and scholar Akin Euba has formulated two theories of composition that are relevant here, "African pianism" and "creative ethnomusicology." This first concept stemmed from Euba's own desire to "explore the 'African'/percussive aspects of the piano," culminating in a new theory of composition and technique for the piano that creatively integrates elements of traditional African music (Akin Euba: Nigerian Composer). In his second theory of "creative ethnomusicology," Euba proposes a conception of composition informed by fieldwork and ethnography. Here, ethnomusicological research is carried out with the final objective being composition, rather than academic writing. For African composers, many of whom may have studied music outside of their home countries at the graduate level, "creative ethnomusicology" becomes a tool to connect with one's own indigenous, traditional music.

The *Republic Suite*, by Nketia, illustrates some of these characteristics of West African art music. The suite, written for flute and piano, is structured in seven short movements. Written to commemorate Ghana's newly gained independence from the British, the *Republic Suite* was premiered in 1960 (with Nketia himself playing piano) at a concert attended by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah. Each movement of this work is "a musical depiction of aspects of Ghana's independence from Great Britain," and Nketia weaves together a number

of symbolic elements in rather fascinating ways (African Art Music For Flute). Specific song melodies are quoted (including highlife tunes, children's play songs, and a traditional Asante song), while traditional rhythms from different areas of Ghana also appear throughout (African Art Music For Flute). At the same time, Nketia places an emphasis on experimentalism and the avant-garde, characteristic of Western trends in 20th-century composition. Similar to the works of other West African composers, Nketia's *Republic Suite* is fascinating in the way that disparate musical elements are integrated and multiple perspectives (Ghanaian/European) are symbolically expressed.

Plan for the Thesis

In the following chapters I provide musical examples, stories and anecdotes which suggest a fluidity between musical genres in Ghana, further demonstrating how highlife musicians reorganize elements of traditional music/culture within the arena of popular music. In Chapter Two, I examine ways in which musical elements and characteristics may be conceived as continuous between traditional/popular music. I use the highlife standard "Yaa Amponsah" as a case study to examine some of these musical relationships, while focusing primarily of the relationship between the Akan harp "seprewa" and highlife guitarism. In Chapter Three, I examine the textual dimensions of highlife music, exploring ways in which the traditional "mode" of storytelling is utilized by popular musicians. My analysis here focuses on manifestations of storytelling in the realm of the Ghanaian concert party and the political critiques present in songs by Nana Ampadu and his African Brothers Band. In Chapter Four, I examine popular/traditional fusion genres which emerged during the 1970s, including osode-highlife, sikyi-highlife, and Ga cultural highlife. The musicians I discuss here consciously draw

upon tradition as a resource in service of various ideologies and motivations. Chapter Four is followed by a short conclusion section, in addition to an appendix of relevant highlife photographs.

- C H A P T E R T W O -

Musical Continuities Between Popular and Traditional Music

The musical structures and forms that are present in Ghanaian highlife share a direct correlation with Ghana's rich array of traditional music styles. While highlife's hybrid nature implies an implicit integration of diverse musical elements, the basic musical characteristics of highlife derive from traditional music. This process of hybridization was hardly carried out self-consciously in the early 20th century. On the contrary, highlife arose as a reflection of the bi-musical existence shared by Ghanaians living under colonialism, a condition brought about by the introduction of European instruments, Western-style tonality, and church music. The spheres of Western art/popular music and Ghanaian traditional music coexisted parallel to each other, with Ghanaian musicians, radio listeners, and consumers often fluent in both traditions. In this way, I would theorize that guitar players, pianists, etc. had little trouble integrating multiple musical traditions into Ghana's own, unique style of popular music. Ghanaian rhythms, musical forms (e.g. call and response), and harmonies/melodies appear in highlife music, while techniques used to play Western instruments are informed by instruments indigenous to Ghana. Here, I use the highlife standard "Yaa Amponsah" as a case study to examine some of these musical relationships. In addition, I discuss the close relationship between "highlife guitarism" and the Ghanaian *seprewa*, a type of Akan harp. At the same time musical influence has moved in the opposite direction, with neo-traditional genres like *kpanlogo* drawing from highlife and other popular music.

The typical guitar-band highlife ensemble from the 1960s-70s reflects this fusion of diverse elements both Ghanaian and Western. The typical percussion section consists of a kit drum in addition to Ghanaian bells, rattles, and hand drums. While the kit player keeps a steady, regular beat, the other percussionists act generally as a traditional drumming ensemble. These musicians are likely not actually playing in a specific traditional style, yet they operate in a similar manner. A timeline player is ubiquitous, while the playing of a lead hand-drummer is almost freely improvisatory. Melodic instruments occupy the next layer in the guitar-band ensemble. As the genre title suggests, the guitar plays the most important role here, with two or three guitars typically used along with a bass guitar. Like the instruments in a traditional drumming ensemble, guitarists play interlocking melodic lines, and it is not unusual for a guitarist to play the same short ostinato throughout an entire highlife song. Of course, subtle improvisation is employed throughout. In addition, highlife songs from the 1970s on commonly feature keyboard instruments such as organ, and in recent years synthesizers. Above the melodic and percussion instruments are the vocalists. Call and response is a technique used practically universally, with one or more lead singers delivering solo "calls," followed by group responses typically sung in harmony. In regard to song structure, call-and-response refrains typically alternate with longer solo sections that are often declamatory and improvisational. In these long solo sections a lead singer may be telling a story or expounding upon a particular lesson/moral. Group refrains reenter to emphasize this advisory moral or lesson, with the song's message usually distilled in the words of the refrain.

Yaa Amponsah and Traditional Music

As I have described above, the rhythmic, vocal, and harmonic dimensions of Ghanaian highlife are intimately connected with Ghana's traditional music. Here I examine in greater detail the role of timeline, call and response, and harmony in the Ghanaian standard "Yaa Amponsah," a tune from the early 20th century which has provided one of the most enduring guitar riffs in highlife music through the present.[8] I have chosen this classic song as a case study for analysis because the basic characteristics of traditional music that are present in Yaa Amponsah appear in almost all the guitar-band music which followed it. Yaa Amponsah was first recorded in 1928 by Jacob Sam (a.k.a. Kwame Asare), a guitarist whose "Kumasi Trio" represents one of the early highlife guitar-bands. The group also represents one of the first Ghanaian bands ever to record palm wine highlife music. Asare is credited as the composer of the tune, yet it is possible that the Yaa Amponsah riff may have existed long before. The short song tells the story of a woman, Yaa Amponsah, who was likely employed by Asare as a highlife dancer in the town of Apedwa (Collins, "African Guitarism" 178). The narrator professes his love for Yaa Amponsah, declaring that he wishes them to remain lovers even though their marriage is ending. Numerous bands have recorded their own versions of Yaa Amponsah, yet even more remarkable are the ways in which highlife musicians have creatively used the Yaa Amponsah riff. Hundreds of songs feature this basic chord progression, while vocal songs/melodies may in fact be completely different from those of the original Yaa Amponsah.

[8] Highlife songs from the 2000s like Kontihene's "Kro Hin Kro" continue to use the *Yaa Amponah* riff.

Timeline

The timeline concept is central to Ghanaian music, appearing across the spectrum of traditional styles and into highlife, as well as hiplife. Kofi Agawu defines timeline as "a short, distinct, and often memorable rhythmic figure of modest duration (about a metric length or a single cycle), usually played by the bell or high-pitched instrument in the ensemble, and serves as a point of reference. It is held as an ostinato throughout the dance-composition" (73). The rhythmic ostinato of the timeline is the basic unit of organization in the Ghanaian music ensemble. While some timelines may be quite rhythmically complex or extended in duration, this constant pattern remains the musical element to which all other instrumentalists/vocalists relate. The role of the timeline stems from traditional drumming/dance ensembles, yet one would be hard pressed to find any highlife song that does not also include a timeline. Surely this integration of timeline into highlife demonstrates its grand importance, its presence simply expected and taken for granted.

The timeline used in Yaa Amponsah is a simple three-note offbeat pattern, usually played on a clave, bell, or glass bottle (see Figure 2.1). Scholars such as Agawu have referred to this pattern as the "highlife timeline" in reference to its appearance in almost every 4/4 highlife song from the early 20th century through the present. At the same time this important timeline is indigenous to Ghana as a bell pattern used in the Akan dance *sikyi*. Yaa Amponsah is also unique in that the rhythm of the basic guitar riff (once elaborations have been removed) is identical to that of the timeline (see Figure 2.2). In this way, the Sikyi timeline is itself present in the guitar riff amid added elaborations and improvisation.

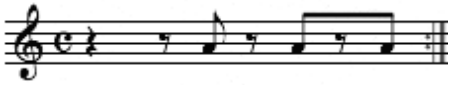

Figure 2.1: Sikyi or "Highlife" timeline

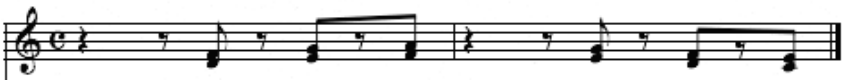

Figure 2.2: Basic Yaa Amponsah riff

Other timelines drawn from traditional styles do appear frequently in highlife songs as well. In addition to 4/4 meters, 3/4 and 6/8 songs frequently use such traditional timelines as found in *adowa* and *agbadza* (Asante and Ewe dances respectively).

Call and Response

Like the concept of timeline, call and response is a technique that is pervasive throughout much of Ghana's traditional and popular music. This structural device facilitates group participation in the context of traditional music, providing a space in which audience/community members may join in choral responses while lead musicians with specialized musical knowledge perform more complex "calls." These lead singers are also able to integrate improvisation and creativity into their melodic lines, while responses remain relatively more static. Much in the same way, call and response is pervasive in Ghanaian highlife. Songs may range from those which prominently feature solo singing with only brief call and response refrains, to others which rely more heavily on group singing. Like the timeline, call and response is so important that it is simply taken for granted as an element of musical organization in highlife.

The exchange between call and response in Yaa Amponsah is a relatively simple one. Here, the call states "Yaa Amponsah mi gyae aware (Yaa Amponsah let's get divorced)," while the response echoes "Yaa Amponsah gyae aware (Yaa Amponsah let's get divorced)" in a

harmony of parallel thirds. The lead singer goes on to elaborate the original call while singing Yaa Amponsah's praises in several declamatory, improvisational solo sections throughout the rest of the song. Yaa Amponsah's beauty is referenced here (her silky hair, long graceful neck), and the singer promises the object of his affection wealth, if only he were a millionaire (Collins, "African Guitarism" 179).

Harmony & Tonality

The harmonic/melodic dimensions of traditional and popular music in Ghana have largely been ignored by scholars. While early analyses of African music have focused almost solely on rhythm (with scholars problematically conceptualizing harmonic elements as the exclusive contribution of Europeans), it has taken long for indigenous systems of harmony and tonality to be acknowledged. On the contrary, Ghana's rich vocal and instrumental traditions (with music played on aerophones, chordophones, xylophones, etc.) make use of indigenous scales, harmonies, and systems of tonality. In contrast to dance-band highlife,[9] which largely employs Western tonality and functional harmony, guitar-band highlife draws upon these distinctly Ghanaian melodies and harmonies (which may not necessarily be functional in the sense of Western music). These characteristics appear in highlife's vocal melodies. For example, an emphasis is often placed on the flatted 7^{th} scale degree in guitar-band music, a note which appears prominently in traditional Akan singing. Yet perhaps most important is the role played by the guitar in highlife music.

Instead of changing chords based on following a vocal melody, singing is rather built upon the particular guitar riff being used. This pattern repeats as a looped chord progression. In

[9] Dance-band highlife's willing embrace of tonality symbolizes the concern of the black Ghanaian elite to identify with European values and behaviors while distancing themselves from their Ghanaian roots. Later, dance-band music would be further indigenized due to E.T. Mensah, The Ramblers, Uhuru, etc.

this way, a short chord progression (only a few measures long) is repeated again and again for the entire duration of the highlife song. There is in fact a general repertoire of these diverse chord progressions used in guitar-band highlife, some of which are named (like Yaa Amponsah or Dagomba) while others remain nameless. Many songs, then, share the same chord progressions, and listeners are able to recognize these patterns regardless of the different songs sung above them. The simple Yaa Amponsah guitar riff, for instance, moves from I – IV – V (see Figure 2.3).

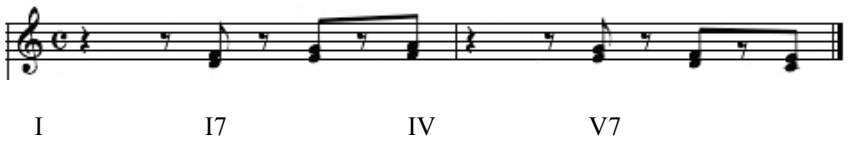

Figure 2.3: Yaa Amponsah chord changes

This type of movement is a basic example of Western-style tonality, yet highly unusual to Western music is the way in which this short two-measure phrase is repeated for the duration of the song without harmonic variation. Stasis is valued here as a characteristic of the style, and further "development" does not occur. Instead, this guitar stasis mirrors the constancy of a traditional drumming ensemble, facilitating vocal and guitar improvisation. Other chord progressions step even further outside the realm of Western tonality, and many highlife tunes feature such cadences as "ii – I" and "ii – i." This type of cadence may appear unusual to Western musicians, yet such cadences are in fact common in traditional Akan music (found within such genres as *Adowa* and *Nwomkro*, for instance). According to John Collins, traditional Akan music does not operate with a fixed tonic, and may instead be conceived of as modal. Collins describes Akan melodies as having two "tone centers" which alternate (as in the example of a two to one "cadence") (Collins, "African Guitarism" 184).

Highlife Guitarism and the Seprewa

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the relationship between popular and traditional music in Ghana is the way in which the "highlife guitar" and the Akan harp called *seprewa* are connected. With the introduction of the European guitar to Ghana, the very style and technique of seprewa playing were "transferred" onto the guitar. In other words, as turn of the century seprewa players began to interpret their own traditional music on the European guitar, a uniquely Ghanaian guitarism emerged.

Figure 2.4: The Akan seprewa

Similar to the well-known bridge harp kora of Mali and the Senegambia, the seprewa is played against the torso, with both hands used to pluck two parallel sides of stacked strings. These strings run from a bent piece of wood to a bridge sitting atop a wooden box with goatskin stretched over the top (see Figure 2.4). While the earliest constructions of the seprewa had only six strings (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la), newer varieties may have 8, 10, 12, or even more (with the flatted seventh included rather than "ti"). Beginning on the right side of the instrument, stings ascend alternating from right to left. So, tuned to C major, the right side of strings would spell out a C major chord and the left side a D minor chord.

Osei Kwame Korankye, one of Ghana's foremost seprewa players, has done a great deal to re-popularize the seprewa by starting schools and teaching at the University of Ghana, collaborating with highlife musicians, performing at national events, and doing academic research. According to Osei and other scholars, the seprewa was captured by the Asante empire in the 1700s as part of the spoils of war upon the defeat of Gyaaman, an Akan state in present-day Côte d'Ivoire. According to a story told by Osei, Asante soldiers discovered an injured man with one leg clutching an unusual instrument, the seprewa. Upon hearing this instrument played, the soldiers decided to bring the man back to the king of Asante, the Asantehene (Osei Tutu the first). Osei Tutu enjoyed this instrument so much that the injured man was appointed a court musician, and the seprewa became a royal instrument used to deliver appellations and praises. This praise function relates to the meaning of the name "seprewa," a composite of three Twi words: Se (speak), Pre (touch), and Wa (small). In other words, "this small instrument can speak when it is touched" (Osei Korankye, personal communication). Like the Asante atumpan drums, the seprewa is literally able to speak by imitating the tonal contours of the Twi language. Proverbs, praises, and appellations may be "spoken" in this way by the seprewa player. At the same time, the seprewa player may also sing in a declamatory, quasi-recitative style as he delivers praises or proverbs and recites appellations.

According to John Collins, the seprewa later moved outside the court of the Asantehene to become "a popular instrument of the common people throughout the Akan area: played not only for praising chiefs, but also accompanying philosophical and topical songs played during funerals and places where palm-wine was drunk" (Collins, "African Guitarism" 192). In this recreational setting, the European guitar quickly replaced the seprewa due to its increasing popularity in Ghana. Perhaps guitars were preferred because they were mass produced and easy

to purchase, durable, portable, and had tuning pegs. Nonetheless, palm wine music and other early highlife genres arose as a consequence of this new preference for the guitar. Yet amazingly, the musical style and technique of seprewa playing were preserved and transferred onto the guitar. Creatively transforming the European guitar, Ghanaian musicians developed a new style, a unique Ghanaian guitarism, which was essentially an imitation of seprewa music.[10] Modal playing, parallel thirds, and oppositional finger picking appear in this early palm wine guitar music, while characteristic seprewa lines and phrases also appear. Two recordings by Apea's Guitar Band ("Odo bi ye de" and "Owea kwadu ampon") are particularly exemplary of this style of "seprewa-guitar." These two songs were originally released on a shellac Decca West Africa single (Decca WA 643), recorded sometime between 1948 and 1958.[11] Apea's Guitar Band is not a well-known highlife group by any means, and this may likely be their only recording.

Both songs by Apea's Band are in the sparse, early style of palm wine highlife. A single guitarist is accompanied by a timeline played on a glass bottle, while the lead singer is joined by a small chorus singing responses (two of these singers likely double on the guitar and timeline as well). In addition, both songs are sung in Twi. For my purposes here I will focus on "Owea kwadu ampon," the B side recording on the Decca single. This song is in a 6/8 meter (6/8 highlife songs were referred to as "blues" in the early to mid 20th century), featuring a somewhat complex 7-note timeline the length of one measure (see Figure 2.5).

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[10] This phenomenon has occurred similarly in other African contexts. Most famously, the Chimurenga style of Zimbabwean popular musician Thomas Mapfumo features melodic lines of the mbira thumb piano played on the guitar. In this case, the guitar has been used to imitate the traditional mbira music of the Shona people.

[11] These recordings are available online at the "Archival Sound Recordings" page on the *British Library* website as part of a collection of 952 recordings from the Decca West Africa yellow label series (1948-1955): http://sounds.bl.uk/Browse.aspx?collection=Decca-West-African-recordings&browseby=Browse+by+country&choice=Ghana.

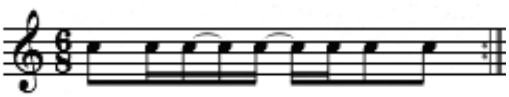

Figure 2.5: "Owea kwadu ampon" timeline.

Call and response sections in harmony alternate with longer vocal solos, sung in the typical declamatory/quasi-recitative style that is found in seprewa music and other Akan genres. Harmonically, movement occurs from G minor to A minor, and for the duration of the song the guitar continues to rock between only these two chords (what I have described earlier as a "ii – i" cadence). Here we see John Collins' modal conception of Akan music as having "two tone centers."

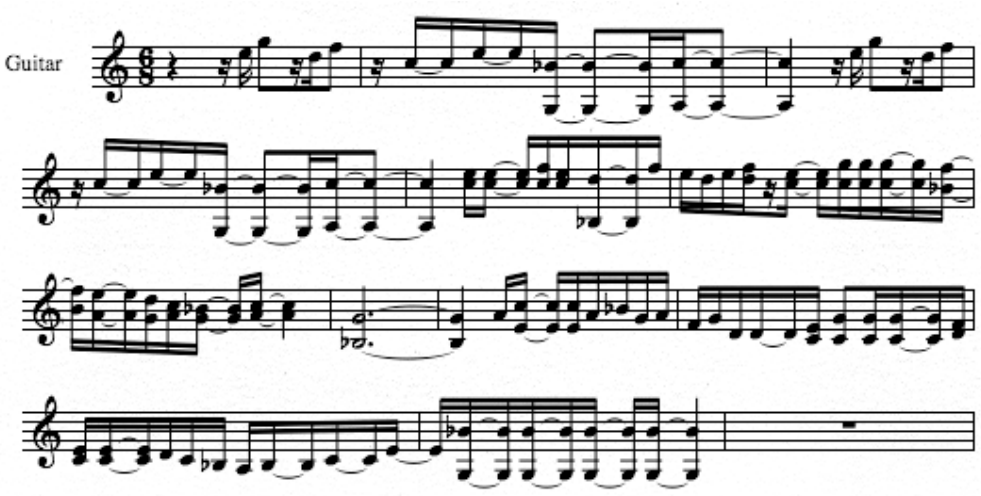

Figure 2.6: Guitar introduction to "Owea kwadu ampon"

The short guitar introduction that begins the recording (Figure 2.6) exemplifies this movement between G minor and A minor, in addition to harmonies/phrases characteristic of seprewa playing. Parallel thirds appear frequently here, as the seprewa itself may be conceived as vertically organized in thirds (any two strings next to each other play a third). In addition, melodically complex descending lines are characteristic (appearing in measures five and nine).

These lines move towards a concluding ii – i cadence, followed by a indefinite "vamp" on G minor. Of course, these characteristics do not appear in every highlife song, as Ghana's popular music is remarkably diverse. Nonetheless, "Owea kwadu ampon" and other early palm wine recordings demonstrate the intimate connection between Ghanaian guitarism and traditional seprewa music, a relationship which lies at the roots of highlife.

Kpanlogo, Popular Music, and Highlife

I have demonstrated how musical elements and instruments from traditional Ghanaian music have been transferred to highlife, using the Akan seprewa and the tune Yaa Amponsah as case studies. Yet this process has also historically worked in the opposite direction. On this fluid highlife/traditional continuum, musical influence has moved from highlife/popular music to *traditional* styles as well. This runs contrary to conceptions of traditional African music as ancient and unchanging. In conclusion, I discuss the "traditional" Ga dance Kpanlogo, a product of the 1960s which reflects this highlife influence.

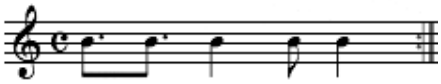

Figure 2.7: Kpanlogo timeline

Kpanlogo is today one of the most popular traditional genres performed both within and outside of Ghana. According to research conducted by John Collins, Kpanlogo was created in the 1960s by Otoo Lincoln of Bukom, Accra and his Kpanlogo Special Band (Collins, *Highlife Time*. P. 110). The original Kpanlogo songs were based on Ananse[12] stories Lincoln had heard from his grandfather, while the musical elements of the dance were diverse and far-reaching.

[12] Ananse is the name of the famous spider character found in Ghanaian folktales. "Anansesem" (spider tales) refers to Ananse stories and, in a broader sense, all stories told in Ghana.

Kpanlogo's roots are in older traditional Ga dances in a 4/4 meter like Waka/Oge, Kolomashie, and Gome. Yet, according to Collins, the 5-note timeline of Kpanlogo (see figure 2.7) originated from music of the Caribbean and South America (this pattern is referred to as "son clave" in Afro-Cuban music). At the same time, this popular timeline was introduced to Ghana through highlife. Along with the Sikyi timeline, this 5-note pattern is one of the quintessential highlife timelines. In an interview with Collins, Lincoln himself goes so far as to describe the Kpanlogo dance as "[His] own version of highlife" (Collins, *Highlife Time* 110). In addition, this dance drew upon the influence of American popular music, integrating dance steps inspired by Elvis Presley, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Twist.

The example of Kpanlogo demonstrates the fluidity with which musical elements have historically passed from popular to traditional music in Ghana and vice versa. This relationship between different musical spheres is unique to the Ghanaian context, perhaps the larger context of African music as well. These spheres are in fact not separate or distinct from each other, but closely intertwined and overlapping, forming a popular/traditional music continuum.

- C H A P T E R T H R E E -

Highlife Texts

Anansesem, Storytelling, and Guitar-Band Highlife

Like the early troubadour traveling from town to town telling news, tales and wisdom accompanied by music, or the elders sitting under the tree teaching the young, storytelling is actually the main aspect of Highlife. Daily problems are recognized by people and told how they can cope with them. Old wisdom is updated and again spread by the songs and records. One liners from the lyrics are picked up and used in daily language, written down on houses and cars (transport vans) in the streets (Dailyleftover).

If I know better for my own life, now whose fault? Na me cause 'am oga.[13]

- Snr. Eddie Donkor, "Na Me Cause 'Am"

In the previous chapter I have demonstrated ways in which the musical elements of popular and traditional music in Ghana are linked, yet this relationship is also expressed in the texts of highlife songs. Scholars have frequently conceptualized popular music in Africa as music that is intended primarily for dancing. However, this assertion is an oversimplification which serves to deemphasize the importance of popular song texts. In contrast, song lyrics do in fact occupy an important space for contemplation and dialogue in Ghana. Dancing to highlife is common in the context of dancehalls and nightclubs, and surely listeners are not always

[13] "Na Me Cause 'Am," by Snr. Eddie Donkor, tells a story in Pidgin English about a young boy from a rural village who leaves school and travels to the "big city" of Lagos, Nigeria. The young man falls prey to hustlers and loses his money, realizing that the city is in fact not all fun and glamour. The song's refrain roughly states: "If I know what is best for me and my own life, and I act foolishly, then whose fault is it? It is my own fault."

completely conscious of song lyrics/meanings, yet guitar-band highlife invites listeners to contemplate texts that are often philosophical, poetic, and humorous. Stories and proverbs are integrated into songs in service of moral lessons, social critique, advice, and other didactic objectives. In this way, a more nuanced conception of highlife music reveals multiple social functions at work simultaneously (enjoyment, contemplation, education, etc).

In *Representing African Music*, Kofi Agawu beautifully conveys the textual depth of highlife songs, articulating the ways in which "tradition" and "modernity" are negotiated in song lyrics:

> Highlife provides an insight into the imagined realities of modern living while also exemplifying with unparalled lucidity African modes of play (joking, making fun of, jesting, entertaining, teasing, amusing, acting, dallying). No subject is taboo for the highlife singer as long as he observes the appropriate conventions of speaking. Topics can be sacred or secular. Songs may deal with witches and nightlife, accidents, death, religion, birth, and one's relatives. Poverty is a favorite, as are envy, jealousy, and retaliation. The relationship between men and women occupies an important place, but very rarely is it presented in exclusive, narcissistic terms. (127).

According to Agawu, distinctly "African modes" are employed in highlife texts, modes which derive from Ghana's traditional music and culture. The subject of death, for instance, may be discussed in the lyrics of a highlife song by an artist like Alex Konadu much in the same way as it would appear in traditional funeral music such as the Akan dance *Adowa*. Yet analyses of highlife which seek to identify and label themes/lyrics as explicitly "traditional" or "non-traditional" are problematic. Such analyses overemphasize the explanatory power of popular texts while attempting to solidify inherently fluid categories. Two articles published in *Research in African Literatures* during the 1980s document a fascinating debate over this distinction: "The Image of Death in Akan Highlife Songs of Ghana" (1980) by anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest

and "The Akan Highlife Song: A Medium of Cultural Reflection or Deflection?" (1984), a critical response to the first article by University of Ghana professor Kwesi Yankah.

Sjaak van der Geest's original article argues that notions of death and the afterlife are conceived of differently in traditional Akan music and highlife. Analyzing the texts of one hundred Akan highlife songs as his research methodology, Geest posits that highlife music puts forth decidedly non-traditional themes which emphasize the finality of death. In contrast to traditional Akan belief systems, the conception of life after death is missing from highlife. Kwesi Yankah's rather devastating response paper disagrees with Geest's central claim, more importantly taking issue with his research methodology. As a cultural insider and a native speaker of Akan, Yankah is able to debunk Geest's claim due to his understanding of the deep levels of meaning behind Akan proverbs, metaphors, and stories. Geest is not only limited to a sample of one hundred highlife songs, but is also not a fluent speaker of Akan, instead relying on English translations. Most importantly, Geest is too quick to assume that song lyrics directly represent cultural attitudes and behaviors. Yankah aptly writes, "The author [Geest] overestimates the diagnostic potential of popular art, misconceiving the Akan highlife as an unedited play-out of Akan culture in its entirety" ("The Akan Highlife Song" 570). As in the larger field of popular music studies, research that fails to take a holistic approach while relying too much upon song lyrics as direct representations of reality is often considerably weak.

Instead, I am interested in what Agawu describes as traditional "modes of speaking" and "ways of world-making" in highlife songs (127). These broader categories concern the very ways in which communication occurs in music. In this chapter I examine the Ghanaian practice of storytelling, a particular way of "world-making" and "speaking" which appears frequently in guitar-band highlife. Integrating humor, entertainment, and morals/lessons, the stories which

appear in highlife serve a didactic function. Social values, norms, and behaviors are reinforced through these often-fictional stories, while philosophical topics such as death may also be dealt with. Like the musical elements of highlife, this popular storytelling device originates from traditional Ghanaian life and culture. The traditional practice of storytelling, referred to as *anansesem* by the Akan, similarly serves a pedagogical function. Here, I discuss the ways in which the stories present in highlife texts are linked to traditional "modes" of storytelling, in particular examining the music of Nana Kwame Ampadu's African Brothers Band and the comedic drama of the Ghanaian "concert party."

Storytelling in Traditional Life

Oral storytelling serves important functions in communities across the African continent. The *griot* tradition present in such West African nations such as Mali and Senegal is quite well known and has been much discussed in the scholarly literature. At once a musician, historian, and poet, the *griot* recites lineages/appellations, praises, and stories through music. In addition, *griots* are known for their knowledge, wit, and wordplay, often adapting older, canonic stories as social/political critiques in the present. Stories occupy a similarly important role in traditional life in Ghana. Ghanaian dramatist Saka Acquaye writes that "there is…a fundamental pastime found in every village – that of storytelling. In Ghana, Kweku Ananse, the clever spider, is the central character around which most of these stories are told" (60). As in other storytelling contexts across the continent, characters in Ghanaian stories are represented as animals (the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, use the turtle as the central character in stories).

In Ghana, Kweku Ananse the spider is the central character in folktales. Ananse originates from Akan storytelling traditions, yet is widely known in Ghana. Due to the

prevalence of Ananse in traditional stories, the Akan refer generally to folktales/fables as *anansesem*, or "Ananse stories." Ananse himself is a mischievous, amoral, and humorous trickster. Kwawisi Tekpetey writes, "One systematically finds him [Ananse] engaged in activities directed at gratifying his instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraints" (74). Ananse's greed and selfishness are often humorous subjects, as his actions may extend into the realm of the absurd (i.e. stealing food from his wife and children through trickery). In Ghana, Ananse stories have taken on a national character while being embraced by multiple ethnic groups. At the same time, the trickster spider character is prominent in the stories of other groups (the Ewe spider character Ayiyi appears to be a counterpart to Ananse). Fascinatingly, the Ananse character also appears in various guises in stories across the African diaspora from such locations as the Caribbean and American South. In this way, Ananse stories have become globalized, with Ghanaian stories frequently appearing in American classrooms and children's' books.

Similar to the performance of music, the telling of *anansesem* takes on particular importance in Ghana within the context of the community. In rural settings, writes Togbi Kumassah, mothers often tell stories to their children by the fireside. Kumassah goes on to describe, "After a hard day's work, people gather in the public square in the evening to listen to good storytellers. This meeting constantly reinforces social cohesion as people exchange views and ideas, sharing their experiences before and after the storytelling session" (*xxiv*). During these sessions music and spoken word are integrated, with audience participation and call and response eliminating the distinction between performer and audience. In urban settings, children hear these same stories in school, from family, and through the mass media. The beloved 1990s television program *By the Fireside*, for instance, was modeled after these traditional storytelling

sessions. During this bi-lingual TV program, Ananse stories were told by two narrators in English and Ghanaian languages. At the same time, these stories were responded to and acted out by a group of children featured on the program. In this way, children growing up in a variety of settings (rural/urban) during the '90s were exposed to traditional *anansesem* through the mass media.

Anansesem serve additional functions in relation to the socialization of children and the maintenance of group values within society. Stories warn against attitudes of "arrogance, pride, greed, anger, and laziness," while extolling virtues that are valued within society (i.e. helping others, respecting one's elders) (Togbi Kumassah *xxv*). These stories may at once be philosophical, didactic, and humorous. As in other global storytelling traditions, *anansesem* also often seek to explain specific natural phenomena or characteristics. Yet these stories are not meant only for children, but the entire community as a whole. Listeners gain from each storytelling session in different ways, while "no story is just to illustrate retribution for a wrongdoing; no story is just to explain an animal feature; no story is just to illustrate the origin of a change in society" (Cottrell *xviii*).

Highlife and *Anansesem*

Like *anansesem*, the stories which are told in highlife songs frequently serve educative or didactic functions. Social values, norms, and behaviors are reinforced through these often-fictional stories, while philosophical or existential topics such as death may also be dealt with. Regardless of the seriousness of the subject matter, humor is frequently utilized in these stories. Storytelling appears to be practically ubiquitous in the guitar-band music of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the Akan-style highlife of such artists as Alex Konadu and Nana Ampadu. The

stories which are told by these individuals reach a national audience and occupy the public imagination, as they are widely disseminated through the radio and the sale of records. Consciously drawing upon *anansesem*, these artists use traditional storytelling forms to communicate with listeners while articulating anxieties/concerns/critiques of modernity. In this way, highlife singers may employ traditional storytelling as a means to discuss topics such as urbanization, Westernization, or political corruption. In the following pages I discuss ways in which highlife musicians of the 1960s and '70s utilize the mode of traditional storytelling in popular music. In particular, I take the institution of the Ghanaian "concert party" and the song "Ebi Tie Ye" by Nana Ampadu and his African Brothers Band as case studies.

Highlife, Storytelling and the Concert Party

Like highlife, comedic theatrical performances or "concert parties" emerged in Ghana during the 20th century as a hybrid popular art form. The concert party is a Ghanaian institution, a form of traveling comedic theatre which has remained tremendously popular across lines of age and class. Much like American vaudeville and minstrel shows, "concert" performances feature slapstick comedy and clown-like characters, alternating sections of spoken text with musical performances. Guitar-band highlife is largely the music of the concert party, and the histories of both art forms are intimately connected. Concert party troupes themselves are groups of itinerant actors and musicians (traditionally all male) who make a living by staging public plays in towns and cities across Ghana. As Catherine Cole has demonstrated in *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and creativity are the defining characteristics of concert party performers. At the same time, these performing troupes may be related to or associated with already existing bands. In the 1970s, for instance, practically every well-known guitar-band also

operated as a concert party (i.e. Kumapim Royals, City Boys, A.B. Crentsil's Ahenefo, Eddie Donkor, Alex Konadu, etc.).

Plays are performed in local Ghanaian languages, yet they are unwritten and highly improvisatory, typically featuring plots which focus on the challenges and dramas of everyday life. Family matters such as polygamy, inheritance, or the cruelty of relatives are popular subjects. Elements of the supernatural are also often present, appearing in the form of witches, ghosts, and various mythical beasts. Concert party audiences also play an important role during the performance. Patrons of the concert pay a small admission charge, while children are often allowed in free of charge in exchange for chores/tasks done for the performers (anything from fetching props to washing the actors' clothes!) (Braun, *Stageshakers!*). These audiences are also extremely diverse, representing the wide appeal of the concert party. As one performer stated, "Everybody comes – families, the young, the old, not only single young people and couples" (Ricard, p. 169). While performances are frequently given on raised stages or platforms (a convention which derives from Western theatrical practice), audience participation is uniquely Ghanaian. According to K.N. Bame, this participatory role is "almost always overwhelming" (34). Audience members may call out to actors in anger or solidarity, shower actors with money, and go so far as to take the stage themselves in some cases. Cole provides the example of a play by Kakaiku's band which features an orphan girl who is being mistreated by her stepmother. According to Cole's informants, the actor playing the villainous stepmother risked physical endangerment from the audience (throwing rocks, bottles) at the highest point of her mistreatment (Cole, p. 146). As I explain in the following paragraphs, this particular audience/performer relationship derives from traditional storytelling sessions.

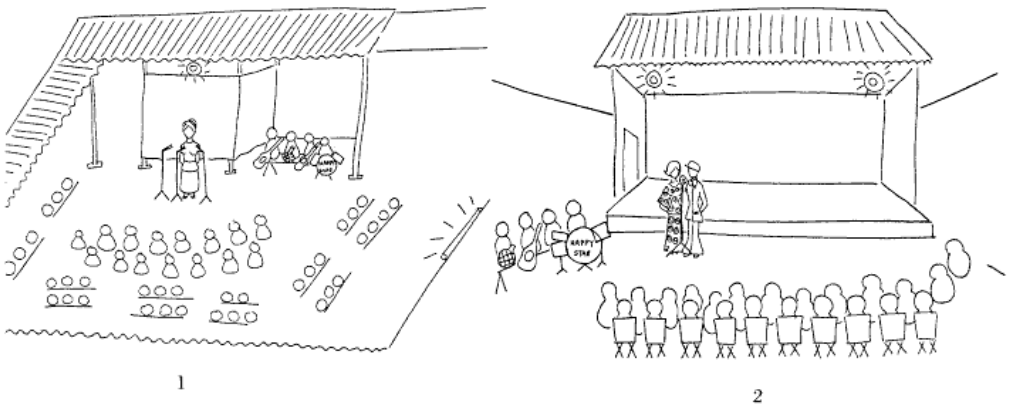

Figure 3.1: Two examples of the layout of a "concert" performance, drawn by A. Ricard (167). Both drawings show the placement of the backing highlife band, singers, and audience members. Children are pictured sitting on the ground.

Early concert party performance was influenced by American and British theatre in terms of theatrical conventions, the use of blackface makeup, etc., yet the roots of this popular art form lie in traditional storytelling and *anansesem*. A fair amount of scholarly literature has analyzed some of the ways in which this relationship is manifested (*Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* by Catherine Cole, *West African Popular Theatre* by Barber, Collins, and Ricard, and various works by K.N. Bame). In her work, Cole identifies similarities between concert party clowns or "Bobs" and the Ananse character. Working with members of the Jaguar Jokers troupe as her informants, Cole compares the Jokers' beloved stock-character "Opia" (the persona of actor Y.B. Bampoe) to the trickster spider of traditional Akan storytelling. Like Ananse, Opia is selfish, greedy, insatiable, and willing to trick anyone for his own benefit. In the play *Onipa Hia Moa*, for instance, Opia steals food from his blind, dying friend Kofi, practically allowing Kofi to starve to death (Braun, *Stageshakers!*). At once, Opia is a lovable, endearing character whose absurd actions are humorous to audience members. Yet Cole's informants are not consciously or explicitly referencing Ananse in the character of Opia. These actors rather draw upon diverse

comedic inspirations, reorganizing elements of tradition in order to communicate with Ghanaian audiences.

The concert performance itself is also intimately related to traditional storytelling sessions. In the traditional setting, storytelling sessions combine spoken *anansesem* with songs called "mmoguo" (translated as "sing for nothing songs" by Jonas Yeboa-Dankwa) (33). Mmoguo serve as interludes which allow the storyteller to rest, while underscoring the themes of the stories and keeping audience members engaged. Storyteller and audience both participate in the singing of these songs. Concert parties similarly combine music with spoken text, with highlife interludes taking the place of mmoguo. Rather than taking a secondary role, highlife music is central in the context of the performance. The ways in which traditional stories and concert plays affect audiences are also related. Like *anansesem*, which seek to teach good morals and behavior, concert plays often serve a didactic purpose. Concert parties convey one or more moral "lessons," often explicitly stated by the actors themselves.

At the same time, audience members apply the plays they view to their own lives and circumstances. K.N. Bame writes, "Members of the audience are presented with echoes of their own bitter or happy relationships and experiences or of those of their friends…A woman who witnesses an incident in a play similar to her own agonizing experience busts into tears and releases the painful feelings accumulated as a result of that experience" (101). *Anansesem* are similarly used to represent present concerns relating to specific individuals or the community. In this way, canonic stories may be utilized or even adapted to anonymously reference particular individuals while critiquing others. In both contexts (traditional/popular), a story or performance always represents something more than the plot itself.

"Ebi Te Yie": Anansesem as Political Critique

Nana Kwame Ampadu, leader of the African Brothers Band, is one of Ghana's most prolific musicians and the quintessential highlife storyteller/philosopher. Kwesi Yankah describes Ampadu as the "single most important folk commentator in Ghana's contemporary history." He goes on: "Eloquent, prolific, and erudite in Akan oral traditions, Ampadu appeals to the rural folk with very philosophical lyrics and social commentary spiced with proverbs, witticisms, and idioms." Ampadu is at once an extremely charismatic figure, with writer Gary Stewart describing him as "regal" and making a comparison to Michael Jackson (70). Ampadu is truly a living legend. Highlife songs by Nana Ampadu and the African Brothers Band frequently make use of *anansesem* and the Akan technique of *akutia* (indirection) in order to convey moral lessons or deliver social/political critiques. "Ebi Te Yie," one of the African Brothers' first hit songs, takes the form of an *anansesem* as a means of delivering a political critique of the ruling National Liberation Council. I use "Ebi Te Yie" as a case study to examine the ways in which highlife musicians draw upon traditional storytelling forms and techniques.

Nana Ampadu was born the son of a lineage head/subchief in the town of Adiemmra in the primarily Akan Eastern Region of Ghana (Yankah, "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 62). According to Kwesi Yankah, Ampadu learned traditional singing while growing up, also showing a great talent for "verbal wit," proverbs, and storytelling (Yankah, "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 61). In this way, Ampadu received his earliest musical education within the context of traditional music, while learning the art of storytelling by listening to and observing town elders. During the 1950s, Ampadu learned how to play highlife-style guitar and became a somewhat successful freelanced songwriter. Yet the African Brothers, originally a small group of only several musicians, represented Ampadu's own band of which he was the leader. The African Brothers

Band International was formed in Accra in 1963, the result of a partnership between Nana Ampadu and rhythm guitarist Eddie Donkor. Regardless of its modest beginning, the African Brothers were launched to fame with the 1967 release of "Ebi Te Yie" (Some are favorably positioned) (Yankah, "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 62).

"Ebi Te Yie" tells an *anansesem* about a meeting held for all the animals in the land. Kwesi Yankah provides a brief description of this story in "Nana Ampadu, the Sung-Tale Metphor, and Protest Discourse in Contemporary Ghana":

> There was once a meeting of all the animals to discuss the concerns of the animal world. All the animals were present, including Leopard and the orphan Antelope. It so happened that Leopard took a seat directly behind orphan Antelope and started mistreating him. He clawed Antelope's tail to the ground, making it impossible for him to actively participate in the discussion. No sooner would orphan Antelope begin to speak than Leopard would silence him, with warning that the meeting was not meant for skinny creatures. The mistreatment went on until orphan Antelope could bear it no longer. He plucked up courage and made a loud plea to the presiding chairman. "Petition on the floor, point of order," he said. "Mr. Chairman, secretary, elders here assembled. I move for an immediate adjournment of the meeting, because some of us are not favorably positioned. Some are favorably, other are not." As soon as the meeting saw through the words of the Antelope, there was an immediate adjournment (Yankah, "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 63).

Ampadu tells the story of "Ebi Te Yie" in declamatory, quasi-recitative solo sections which are highly improvisatory. While the story is told in Twi, Ampadu breaks into English for comic effect as Antelopte calls out "Chairman, Secretary, Point of order!" Alternating with these solo sections are group responses in which refrains of "Ebi Te Yie" are repeated in harmony. This repetition of the story's central theme in the form of a proverb (some are positioned better than others) serves to reinforce the meaning of the *anansesem*.

As in the context of traditional storytelling, *anansesem* are richly layered with levels of meaning accessible to cultural insiders. Considering the political climate in Ghana in 1967, "Ebi te Yie" may be read as a political critique of the ruling National Liberation Council. In February

of 1966, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president after independence, was disposed in a coup orchestrated by the NLC. It has long been suspected that the American CIA was also involved in Nkrumah's removal. The NLC coup was particularly violent, and Ampadu's song speaks to the ways in which this new government used force and intimidation to limit free speech. At once foreshadowing the series of military coups which would continue to occur in Ghana until the 1980s, "Ebi Te Yie" presents a "world of class distinctions, where might and brute force prevail, the opinion of the deprived is censured, and representative forums are mere tokens" (Yankah, "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 63).

At the same time, "Ebi Te Yie" skillfully makes use of the Akan verbal technique of *akutia* or "indirection." Like the African-American verbal technique of "signifyin'," akutia involves the use of innuendo, metaphor, and "double-talk" as indirect forms of criticism. In the context of traditional life, describes Jonas Yeboa-Dankwa, public insult or criticism of Akan chiefs/kings is highly taboo. As "religio-political head of the community," such insults would be damaging to the community while also showing disrespect to the "ancestors" (Yeboa-Dankwa 30). Yet in the context of storytelling, individuals in positions of power may be freely lampooned or criticized through the indirect style of akutia. The animal characters of an *anansesem* may be used to represent particular individuals, yet critiques remain culturally appropriate due to the anonymity offered by these characters. At the same time, audience members are keenly aware of the targets of akutia. In this way, Ghanaians during the 1960s were able to clearly read the covert meaning of "Ebi Te Yie" as this song was disseminated over the radio. It is hardly surprising then, that "Ebi Te Yie" was quickly banned from the radio by the NLC government due to its covert political critique and subversive potential (Yankah "Sung-Tale Metaphor" 64).

Conclusions

The case studies of "Ebi Te Yie" and Ghanaian concert parties demonstrate ways in which guitar-band highlife musicians/performers negotiate "tradition" and "modernity" in song texts. Concert party actors/musicians make use of *anansesem* and traditional storytelling techniques in their performances, reflecting a form of popular theatre that is distinctly Ghanaian. Nana Ampadu and the African Brothers similarly use the form of *anansesem* and Akan akutia in order to powerfully critique the political order. The mode of traditional storytelling, then, is intentionally employed by singers as a means to communicate to listeners in a manner with which they are familiar. In this way, techniques from traditional life are reorganized in the realm of popular music, uniquely shaped in order to deal with the realities of contemporary, urban Ghana.

- C H A P T E R F O U R -

Fusion Music and Experimentalism

Traditional Music as Resource

"Eyaa Duom," by the Uhuru Dance Band, represents an early attempt at highlife experimentalism through the fusion of different styles. Likely recorded in the late 1960s or early 1970s, this unusual highlife song uniquely fuses traditional and popular music in a highly conscious way, a trend which would become increasingly popular with highlife musicians in the 1970s. "Eyaa Duom" begins with a free, declamatory vocal section featuring call and response between a solo singer and chorus. Referred to by Ghanaian musician Sowah Mensah as "chants," these unmetered vocal songs frequently serve as introductions to traditional pieces. Often praising the performing group itself, boasting or offering philosophical queries, these opening "chants" are followed by the entry of bells, drums, and the rest of the performing ensemble. Following the introductory "Eyaa Duom" chant, drums enter playing *adowa*, a traditional funeral dance of the Akan. Horns and other melodic instruments quickly enter over the 6/8 adowa drumming (see Figure 4.1). In this way, we at once hear highlife and traditional music sounding simultaneously.

Figure 4.1: Adowa timeline

"Eyaa Duom" changes meter halfway through the song, switching to the more conventional highlife timeline in 4/4. Yet adowa returns again at the end of the recording, with the kit drummer mimicking the sound of the Akan atumpan, the lead drum of the adowa ensemble, on his tom drums.

According to Kofi Agawu's analysis of the Uhuru's idiosyncratic "Eyaa Duom," adowa music is "not assimilated as such but is swallowed whole" (145). Contrasting with my discussion of musical continuities between popular and traditional music in Chapter Two, "Eyaa Duom" represents a highly conscious, ideologically driven incorporation of traditional music into highlife. In this way, rhythms, songs, and forms explicitly reference specific traditional styles. During the 1970s, numerous Ghanaian bands experimented with this "swallowing whole" of genres through the creation of fusion highlife styles. For example, the Ramblers Dance Band's Jerry Hansen, an ethnic Ewe, incorporated agbadza rhythms into songs like "Ekombi," while Christy Azuma and the Uppers International fused highlife and afrobeat with traditional styles from Northern Ghana (Sowah Mensah, personal communication).

Highlife musicians sought to expand highlife into new territories during this period in the '70s, while drawing upon unique styles from their own areas and ethnic groups (Sowah Mensah, personal communication). This represented a move away from highlife's primarily Akan and Ga roots in favor of new musical sounds. In this way, fusion genres (what Agawu refers to as "hyphenated forms") represent an assertion of ethnic identity through the incorporation of ethnically coded rhythms, harmonies, songs, etc. Traditional music, then, becomes a resource, a repository of musical ideas which musicians may creatively draw upon. These types of fusion genres have generally proven extremely popular in Ghana, for highlife musicians skillfully reorganize elements of tradition that are familiar both consciously and unconsciously to

Ghanaian listeners. Yet scholars of highlife and Ghanaian music have not fully engaged with the hyphenated fusion styles of the '70s and later decades. In this chapter, I examine three of the most popular fusion styles which emerged during the 1970s from guitar band musicians: C.K. Mann's osode-highlife, K. Gyasi's sikyi-highlife, and the Ga cultural highlife style developed by the group Wulomei. In particular, I pay special attention to the last genre as an in depth case study of a neo-traditional popular music style.

Osode-Highlife

Charles Kofi "C.K." Mann, known as the Osode King, was one of the most popular highlife musicians in Ghana during the 1970s. Mann grew up in the predominately Akan Western Region of the country, working as a sailor during his youth and playing with a variety of guitar-bands (including Kakaiku's famous concert party band). Yet Mann's musical career took off in the late sixties after forming his own Carousel 7 band. It was with this group that Mann would record his first Osode-highlife fusion music in the late sixties with the hit "Edina Brenya." In an article from Ghanaian magazine *Uhuru*, osode is described as "The game and music of the sea-faring fisherfolk of the Central Coast of Ghana. On Tuesdays, when there's no expedition, they gather at the beach and make music by playing on boxes and dancing in abandon" (Adih 34). On the back cover of the album *C.K. Mann Big Band* from the later 1970s, Mann discusses his own creative engagement with traditional osode music: "I lived at Emisado – Cape Coast near the beach and close to the "fisher folks" who perform the "True Osode" with such zeal, warmth and feeling – that you surely get the extraordinary "Soul feel" in Osode – and I have always liked Osode music – long before my sea faring days and even long before I picked up my

first loved instrument – But I know the limitations of the African or Ghanaian instruments like the Ashewa, hand piano or rhythm box that are used to perform Osode."

Mann's osode-highlife combines musical elements and songs from the recreational sailors' music with Western instruments (guitars, organ, kit drum) and the stylistic features of highlife. In the 27 minute-long "Osode Medley" from Mann's first album *Party Time with "Ceekay,"* a traditional osode hand-clapping pattern appears throughout the entire recording (see Figure 4.2).

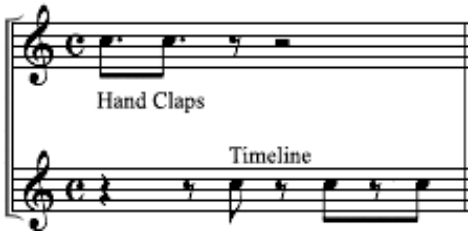

Figure 4.2: Osode hand claps and timeline

At the same time, osode songs like "Edina Brenya" are incorporated into the medley and transformed into highlife as they are given chordal accompaniment by the guitar and other melodic instruments. The cover of *Party Time with "Ceekay"* reflects this fusion of elements from tradition/popular music, as musicians are depicted on the beach (the setting for the performance of osode music) with both guitars and traditional percussion instruments (hand drums, a rattle).

Yet C.K. Mann's incorporation of osode into popular music runs slightly contrary to Agawu's characterization of adowa music "swallowed whole" in "Eyaa Duom." Mann rather references modernization in the quote provided above, describing what he views as the limitations of traditional osode instruments. In this way, the musical elements of osode are reconfigured according to Mann's subjective conceptions of musical modernization. At the same time, the osode-highlife of C.K. Mann was extraordinarily popular during the 1970s and 1980s.

This was music deeply rooted in traditional music and familiar songs, made even more accessible through the addition of a strong dance beat and a "highlife feel."

Sikyi-Highlife

Like C.K. Mann's osode fusions, K. Gyasi's sikyi-highlife represents a reconfiguration of traditional music within the arena of popular culture. Born near Kumasi in 1929 in the town of Patasi in the Ashanti Region, K. Gyasi is one of the important figures looming large in the history of highlife music. As the first musician to introduce the electric organ and a horn section to guitar-band highlife, Gyasi was already an established performer/recording artist when he released the album *Sikyi Highlife* in 1977. Sikyi is a traditional recreational dance of the Asante. Mike Eghan offers a description on the back cover of the *Sikyi Highlife* album: "Sikyi is one of the several down-to-earth forms of our traditional songs, rhythms and dances. Like most of our past-times, Sikyi is performed on moonlight nights by the exuberant youth. They sing about the events of the day, love and hate, hunger and poverty, happiness and sadness, and thru' the rhythms and melodies, render social commentary. Dr. K. Gyasi with his Noble Kings have only unearthed and fashioned the "Sikyi" in their inimitable and unique style."

The *Sikyi Highlife* album features two long medleys, one on each side of the record. However, neither of these songs is immediately recognizable as sikyi music. While the three note off-beat sikyi timeline is present (the same as the highlife timeline), characteristic drum rhythms are not apparent. The petia stick drum used in the sikyi ensemble is absent, along with apentemma, donno, and tamlin drums. Yet Gyasi's sikyi-highlife music is distinctly Akan, and I would argue that Gyasi uses the name "sikyi" primarily to signify a connection between his highlife and traditional Akan music. Some of Gyasi's recordings are in the "sikyi feel" and

others may in fact draw from sikyi songs, yet the defining characteristic of sikyi-highlife is the use of harmonies drawn from traditional Akan music (Sowah Mensah, personal communication). The minor mode is ubiquitous here, with great emphasis placed on movement from chords i to ii (see the section on seprewa music in Chapter Two).

In this way, I hypothesize that sikyi-highlife became immensely popular in the 1970s due to the ways in which "Akan-ness" is signified through musical structures and lyrical content. The philosophical lyrics and contemplative mood featured on this album, for instance, surely contributed to its great popularity at Akan funerals in the '70s. In addition, more recent musicians like Nana Tuffour and Daddy Lumba have continued to use the sikyi-highlife style of K. Gyasi. Artists including Amakye Dede and Daddy Lumba have in fact expanded the genre by arranging traditional sikyi songs within the context of highlife (see Lumba's popular song "Doctor Panee").

Ga Cultural Highlife: A Neo-traditional Popular Music

Ga cultural highlife emerged during the 1970s as an urban, neo-traditional popular music form. The Gas are an ethnic minority in Ghana (where Akans dominate over forty percent of the population) yet they remain the majority in Ghana's capital Accra, as they are the city's oldest, original inhabitants. This ethnic group is primarily bound to the costal and the urban realms, as the sea (in particular fishing) has played a central role in livelihood up until the present. Ga musicians were involved in dance-band highlife since the early 20th century (this variety of highlife according reflects influences from Ga traditional music), yet it was not until the cultural highlife of the 1970s that Gas put forth their own style of guitar-band music. This new music represented a desire to go "back to roots" and revive tradition.

Ga cultural highlife emerged as the brainchild of drummer Nii Tei Ashitey, who founded the pioneering Ga highlife group Wulomei in 1973. Both a traditional and dance-band drummer, Ashitey founded Wulomei as a reactionary move against the influx of foreign music into Ghana. He states his objective as "To bring something out for the youth to progress and to forget foreign music and do their own thing" (Collis, *Musicmakers* 142). Inspired by the proto-highlife Ga konkoma groups of the 1940s, the music of Ashitey's Wulomei incorporates influences from Ga traditional music, Kru sea shanties, work songs, and Akan guitar-band music. Wulomei's original sparse lineup consisted of traditional percussion instruments (bells, rattles, drums), a single guitar, and a chorus of several male and female singers. Here, the percussion section is emphasized heavily, while singing is modeled after the group call and response singing of a traditional dance/drum ensemble both in terms of form and vocal technique. Accompanying the chorus of singers is the guitar, adding a highlife dimension to a style which might otherwise sound very much like traditional music.

The term "Wulomei" itself refers to traditional Ga priests, and the band members of Wulomei self-consciously dress in the same white cloth/hats of Wulomei priests. In this way, the band's name and dress are strategically used to represent deep roots in the Ga community and connections with traditional music/life. In the same manner, quintessentially Ga drums are used in cultural highlife as a means to signify ethnic ties and connections with tradition. The gome drum is a central instrument in the ensemble, a large bass frame drum which is sat upon while played. The musician is able to change the tone of the drum by moving his feet across the drum's head. The gome appears prevalently in traditional Ga music, and there is a specific musical style called "gome" which features this drum prominently. In addition, the osrama drum appears frequently in Ga cultural highlife. This skinny, high-pitched stick drum may by found in

the courts of Ga kings (Mantse), where it is used as a "talking drum." The gome and osrama drums are intentionally used in cultural highlife to signify a shared Ga identity.

Song lyrics similarly relate to uniquely Ga concerns in addition to the everyday subjects of highlife texts. Seas shanties and traditional songs are also often directly incorporated into songs. Wulomei's "Otofo," for instance, is practically identical to the traditional otofo puberty music of the Ga-Adangme. The only difference here is Wulomei's use of highlife guitar in their arrangement. Similarly, drumming in cultural highlife songs may be practically identical to traditional Ga styles in 4/4 styles like kpanlogo, waka/oge, kolomashie, and gome. At the same time, more recent groups have stepped into even more adventurous musical territory. "Wala," by the Bukom Ensemble of former Wulomei member "Big Boy" (Nii Adu), is based on Ga royal music (obonu) in a 6/8 meter. The large bomma[14] royal drums begin the recording with the call and response phrases typical of obonu music (Figure 4.3).

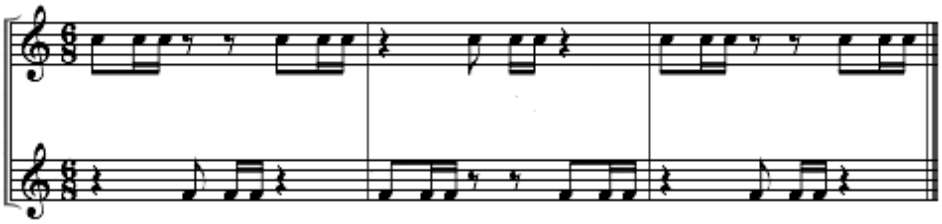

Figure 4.3: Call and response between bomma players in Ga obonu music

Like adowa in the Uhuru's "Eyaa Duom," obonu music is "swallowed whole" here within highlife and re-contextualized in a way that is experimental and artistically interesting.

Like osode-highlife and sikyi-highlife, Ga cultural highlife is extremely popular in Ghana, even almost forty years after the forming of Wulomei. Since then numerous other groups have emerged such as the Suku Troupe, Abladei, Dzadzeloi, and Ashiedu Keteke. Further,

[14] These approximately 4-5 foot tall drums may be variously referred to as "fontomfrom," "obonu," "bomma," or "osrama" depending upon the ethnicity of the person speaking.

Wulomei continues to perform live in Accra with a lineup of new members, now run by Nii Tei Ashitey's daughter and son. Like other fusion genres, Ga cultural highlife is tremendously popular due to the ways in which musicians skillfully reorganize elements of tradition within popular music. Traditional music exists as a resource from which musicians may draw material that is useful or relevant. At the same time, "tradition" is intentionally brought to the forefront in order to express ethnic solidarity and traditional roots. During the traditional Ga Homowo festival, Ga cultural highlife is played in homes and through the streets alongside obonu music and kolomashie. Here, cultural highlife is cast as a neo-traditional popular genre, re-contextualized within a traditional festival. In this way, fusion styles render the divisions between popular and traditional genres meaningless, unclearly defined, and highly fluid.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Ghanaian highlife music is not merely a hybrid or "pidgin" genre, but rather an autonomous, highly complex popular music style. Moving away from earlier academic models which constructed highlife music as "simplified" and unworthy of serious study, I suggest that the relationship between popular and traditional music in Ghana is instead characterized by fluidity and dynamism. Popular musicians negotiate these musical relationships in their recordings and performances, reorganizing elements of traditional music/life within the context of highlife. Here, the image of highlife is instead characterized by creativity, constant change, postcolonial conditions, and continuities with tradition. At the same time, simplistic, outdated models of popular music in Ghana have not yet been properly challenged and refuted in 21st century academic literature. This is largely due to the fact that highlife music has generally been ignored by ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars, relating back to earlier academic writing which served to devalue highlife as popular music. With this thesis, I have attempted to expand the scholarly literature while moving away from simplistic and potentially harmful theoretical models.

As I have demonstrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four, continuities between popular and traditional music are manifested in highlife through musical, textual, and creative choices made by musicians. During the early 20th century musical elements of traditional music were easily integrated into highlife, particularly represented in the relationship between the Akan seprewa harp and highlife "guitarism." At the same time, themes and "modes of speaking" from traditional song texts are integrated into highlife music. The mode of traditional storytelling in

particular is employed by highlife musicians as a means to convey didactic messages, educate audiences, and advise listeners. Occupying an important space in concert parties and Akan guitar-band music, storytelling is practically ubiquitous in the context of highlife. Finally, fusion genres like osode-highlife, sikyi-highlife, and Ga cultural highlife represent an assertion of ethnic identity through the incorporation of ethnically coded rhythms, harmonies, songs, etc. Traditional music, then, becomes a resource, a repository of musical ideas which musicians may creatively draw upon. The common theme running through these specific examples/case studies concerns the creative practice of reorganization, whereby highlife musicians interpret elements of traditional music, culture and life within the context of popular music. In this way, highlife is a distinctly Ghanaian popular music, a style uniquely suited to address the emotions, concerns, and everyday experiences of listeners through its deeply rooted connections with tradition.

At the same time, this thesis does not represent an attempt to claim popular/ traditional fluidity exclusively for guitar-band highlife. On the contrary, more recent styles like hip-life similarly negotiate between traditional music and popular genres. Traditional musical elements and "modes of speaking" are integrated into hip-life, with artists also drawing from older Ghanaian highlife music and American hip-hop. In this way, we may view Ghana's multitude of musical styles (both traditional and popular) as intimately intertwined and in dialogue with each other.

- A P P E N D I X -

Highlife Photographs

1: Map of Ghana's ten regions
(http://www.ezilon.com/maps/africa/ghana-maps.html)

If you wish to see these photographs and album cover images, please consult the print copy shelved in the DeWitt Wallace Library Archives.

- L I S T E N I N G L I S T - [15]

Song Title	Artist	Album
1. Seprewa (Twi)	Unknown	Music in Ghana
2. Owea kwadu ampon	Apea's Guitar Band	Decca WA 643
3. Ebi Te Yie	African Brothers Band	Led By Paa Steel Ampadu
4. Eyaa Duom	Professional Uhuru	Giants of Danceband Highlife
5. Osode Medley	C.K. Mann	Party Time with 'Ceekay'
6. Asafo Beson Medley	C.K. Mann	Funky Highlife
7. Sides One and Two	Dr. K. Gyasi	Sikyi Highlife
8. Sikyi Medley	Nana Tuffour	Hilife - Storm
9. Doctor Panee	Daddy Lumba	Highlife 2000
10. Otofo	Wulomei	In Drum Conference
11. Wonshe Hunu	Dzadzeloi	Two Paddy Follow One Girl
12. Yee Ye Ye	Abladei Culture Group	Abladei Culture Group
13. Wala	Bukom Ensemble	Oke Dzen Sane

[15] For download link to listening list, contact wmatcz@gmail.com

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